

Wayne State's Black-White Graduation Gap Reflects Detroit's Struggles

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Body

ABSTRACT

The university must struggle against poor schooling and poverty in trying to lift the graduation rates of its black students.

FULL TEXT

Wayne State University, like many people who call Detroit home, is finding that succeeding in the Motor City is not as easy as it once was. Drawing a majority of its students from the metropolitan area's schools, the public research university now confronts many of the problems created by the struggling city's decline.

Located in the heart of one of the nation's most racially segregated areas, Wayne State itself has the biggest white-black gap in graduation rates among public universities with significant numbers of students of both races. From 2006 to 2008, fewer than one in 10 of Wayne State's black students graduated within six years, compared with more than four in 10 of its white students, according to the Education Trust, a Washington-based advocacy and research group.

Wayne State's numbers stood out not only because of the wide gap, but also because of the large number of black students it enrolls. Close to one-third of the university's 20,000 undergraduates are black. No other college on the Education Trust's list of the 25 public institutions with the worst graduation gaps, published this year, had a student body in which more than 14 percent were black, nor did any other institution have a single-digit graduation rate for its black students.

While public universities nationwide have an average black-white graduation gap of about 16 percentage points, the Education Trust's report on the issue said such gaps are not inevitable. It pointed to institutions such as Georgia State University, where about one-third of students are black, and the graduation rates of black students are slightly better than those of their white peers.

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Outside observers say the problem at Wayne State is dire. If so few students are completing degrees, some experts say, the university is wasting financial aid, student tuition, and taxpayer money, and failing to help students who need it most.

"If these students aren't graduating, then they're going to be stuck at the same economic level as their parents," said Sharif Shakrani, a professor at the Education Policy Center at Michigan State University. "Education is an important instrument to break that cycle."

A City of Challenges

Wayne State officials say breaking the cycle is their goal. They began to focus on the roots of the university's low graduation rates five years ago, convening groups to suggest interventions and redirecting resources to programs designed to improve academic success. But improvements take time to show up, especially when measuring progress in six-year graduation rates.

And Wayne State officials, faculty members, and community groups say the conversation about the university's poor record on graduation has been too focused on race. Because of its location, part of the university's historic mission has been to provide higher-education access to the city's urban core, a group of residents who face numerous impediments to completing a four-year degree.

"It's being framed as a race issue, but race is never a determining factor," said Howard N. Shapiro, Wayne State's associate vice president for undergraduate programs and general education. "You have to look to the things that correlate with race, things such as socioeconomic status and financial aid, things that are strong determinants of college success."

The barriers to retaining and graduating students are in many respects the problems of Detroit in general. The city has one of the lowest-performing public-school systems in the country, setting a national record for low scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a test taken by fourth, eighth, and 12th graders, with about 77 percent of students scoring below basic math levels in 2009.

Detroit is in a period of economic decline, with an unemployment rate of about 14 percent, and the metropolitan area has sharp racial divisions. In the 2000 census, 70 percent of black residents who lived in the metropolitan area lived within the city limits, where per capita income averaged less than \$16,000 per year, compared with \$100,000 in some parts of the metropolitan area that are predominantly white.

Two years ago, having recognized that it needed to do more to help students succeed, the university issued a report that included 16 recommendations for improving retention, including hiring faculty members with expertise in remedial education, tracking the progress of individual students, and identifying the common factors in the experiences of those who drop out.

Poor Preparation

The university found that students from Detroit, about 23 percent of undergraduates, were less likely than their peers to return to Wayne State for a second year. About 70 percent of first-year, full-time students from Detroit return, a rate about 10 percentage points lower than that of other

students. Administrators attribute part of that difference to the poor preparation Detroit public-school students tend to receive for college-level work.

Students must have a 2.75 grade-point average, or at least a 2.0 average combined with an ACT composite score of at least 21 or an SAT total of at least 990, to be admitted to Wayne State. But the university has several programs that allow students to gain admission with significantly lower scores and grades. About 30 percent of last year's freshman class had ACT scores of less than 18.

Wayne State administrators and faculty members say that if they want the students they admit to succeed, they have to design curricula and provide support services that correct deficiencies in students' high-school instruction.

About half of Wayne State students who take the basic and intermediate algebra courses fail. To raise those low rates—a common impediment to graduation—the department is changing the model of instruction from a computer-lab course to a small-class format that also requires small-group meetings outside class. Daniel Frohardt, chairman of the mathematics department, said students in those classes tended to perform better on tests than do students in the computer-based sections.

Ellen L. Barton, chairwoman of the English department, worked to overhaul the basic English curriculum to respond to poor college preparation. She said many students' high-school writing focused on personal narratives. Required English courses now focus on teaching students different genres of college-level writing, such as expository and persuasive.

Other changes the university has made include improving academic advising by adding more staff members and requiring meetings for students whom faculty members identify as being in need of help. Administrators are also developing partnerships with a number of community colleges in the Detroit area to provide instruction to some students who are not ready for university-level work. Those students would then move to Wayne State to complete bachelor's degrees.

Making Education Matter

If it is to improve its graduation rates, Wayne State must also take on social factors that play into students' decisions to leave college, which are often difficult to define and change.

Part of the issue is financial need. Wayne State enrolls a higher percentage of students who qualify for Pell Grants than any other Michigan college. Studies show that people with high financial need are more likely than their peers to leave college to pursue jobs or to withdraw because of concerns about debt.

The report on retention that Wayne State released two years ago noted that student decisions such as taking a full-time job while also taking a full course load or taking semesters off "undermine academic success and put students at risk of dropping out."

"They leave because they say they want to go work at McDonald's to make enough to come back, but the reason you're in college in the first place is because you can never make enough

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at McDonald's," Mr. Shapiro said. "So the situation never changes, and those students never come back."

Faculty members say many students come from single-parent or low-income households. Because Wayne State is mostly a commuter university, it serves a large number of working students and older adults, who often enroll part time. Those students tend to be vulnerable to life changes that make it hard to continue studies. When their family members lose jobs, those students are sometimes forced to drop courses or withdraw.

"We're looking at these issues, but we really have no control over them," said Seymour J. Wolfson, a computer-science professor and president of the university's Academic Senate.

While more financial aid might help in some situations, faculty members say there is a lack of emphasis on education in many Detroit neighborhoods, a remnant of a time when blue-collar jobs dominated the economy and residents could get well-paying jobs in manufacturing plants with only a high-school diploma.

To combat that attitude, administrators are trying to foster a greater focus on academics, including by getting more students to live on campus. In the past 10 years, the university has built three residence halls, to house about 1,600 students.

That priority, though, has been criticized by some faculty and staff members. who say money spent on facilities would be better used to develop academic-support systems. "Dorms are great for maybe 800 people, but that still leaves 22,000 at home," said Frank F. Koscielski, an academic-services officer at Wayne State. "They're sacrificing students and programs for buildings."

Another change Wayne State is pursuing to foster academic connections is the development of "learning communities," small groups of students who meet regularly and take several courses together. First-year students in learning communities in the fall of 2008 returned at a rate of about 82.6 percent, six percentage points above the university average.

Mr. Shapiro said the communities were based a similar project at Georgia State University, in Atlanta. About 15 years ago Georgia State was in a situation similar to Wayne State in respect to graduation rates, but it has turned around its poor performance. Georgia State's six-year graduation rate for minority students increased from 32.3 percent to 50.7 percent between 2002 and 2007, according to the Education Trust.

Georgia State had taken a number of steps to improve retention, creating learning communities, peer-tutoring programs, and an early-warning system for students who were struggling a few weeks into the academic year. Tim M. Renick, associate provost for academic programs, said that none of the retention efforts were geared specifically for minority students, many of whom are the first in their families to attend college, but that those students tend to sign up in larger numbers than white students and benefit the most from working with peers.

"Traditional college kids might be more comfortable going to knock on a professor's door when they need help," Mr. Renick said. "First-generation kids might have a little less confidence getting the help they need from a professor."

Retention Returns

Other urban colleges, including California State University at Sacramento and the University of Cincinnati, have also seen significant gains in minority graduation and retention rates. Most of their interventions and efforts to improve have been similar to what Georgia State has adopted and what Wayne State is trying. They include personalized advising, programs to teach study skills, and small-group help sessions, especially for basic and remedial courses.

At Wayne State, administrators say they have begun to see some improvements as new programs take effect. Retention rates after students' first and second semesters have risen over the past three years, and administrators expect that to be reflected in higher graduation rates down the road.

The more students return, the more money Wayne State retains in tuition. That, in turn, allows the university to spend more on retention.

Administrators hope that efforts to improve graduation rates ultimately will also help drive recovery in Detroit. The new dorms, they say, have already prompted the opening of coffee shops, restaurants, and stores nearby in midtown Detroit. Having a larger population of students staying on campus for longer periods of time could lure even more businesses, officials say.

"The university is kind of a bright spot here in Detroit," Mr. Shapiro said. "It's probably one of the only things here growing and driving change."

Graphic

Students at Wayne State participate in a "learning community" class on Motown, part of the university's effort to raise its retention and graduation rates, which are particularly low for black students.

Fabrizio Costantini for The Chronicle

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